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Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Background

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SEI WHALE

Sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*) are the third largest member of the Balaenopteridae family, after blue (*B. musculus*) and fin (*B. physalus*) whales. They have historically occurred in all oceans of the world, migrating from low-latitude wintering areas to high-latitude summer feeding grounds. Sei whales' migrations are segregated according to length, sex and reproductive status, with pregnant females the first to migrate to feeding grounds. The youngest animals are the last to arrive and the first to leave, and travel to lower latitudes than older animals. Sei whales are known as exceptionally quick swimmers, and can reach bursting speeds of up to 30 knots. The length of an average adult sei whale is 15 metres, and its weight is 19 tonnes. They live up to 60 years of age, with females giving birth to calves in two to three year intervals.

The pre-whaling North Pacific population, estimated at between 58,000 and 62,000 animals, was reduced to between 7,260 and 12,620 animals by 1974. There is no current population estimate for North Pacific sei whales, and no sightings have been reported in Pacific Canadian waters in recent years. Because sei whales can be easily confused with fin whales, and to a lesser extent Bryde's and minke whales, the actual sei whale population may be underestimated. Sei whales seldom come close to the coast in British Columbia, and normally travel alone or in small groups far offshore.

Why Sei Whales Are At Risk

Both historic and current threats have contributed to the decline of sei whales, and resulted in the species being designated as endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and protected under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Though sei whales were initially not a primary target for commercial whalers, the species became severely exploited in the decades following the depletion of blue and fin whales. In the North Pacific, sei whale catches peaked at a rate of more than 25,000 animals per year in the late 1960s. Sanctioned sei whaling ended in the North Pacific in 1975 when put under worldwide protection by the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

Today, sei whales may face many threats from increasing noise levels from shipping, sonar, military

operations and oil and gas exploration. Other threats may include ship strikes and exposure to pollution. As well, any activities that degrade or displace sei whales from critical foraging habitat represent a threat to the species.

What's Being Done

The endangered North Pacific sei whale population is protected under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). DFO is developing a multi-species Recovery Strategy for blue, fin and sei whales together to address the threats to their long-term survival in the wild. Research is underway to monitor these species through ship-based surveys and acoustic monitoring.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada - Pacific Region
Contact Communications Branch

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